

The Old Mother and Her Army: The Agitative Strategies of Mary Harris Jones

By Pat Creech Scholten

“MOTHER Jones’ is one of the most forceful and picturesque figures in the labor movement,” Clarence Darrow wrote in 1925.² Remembered by militant unionists and recently discovered by a new generation of radicals, Mary Harris Jones continues to be a popular heroine today.³ During her fifty years as a labor organizer, she created a sensation wherever she went. Her activities and jailings even into her eighties won her wide newspaper coverage. “She captured the imagination of American workers as no other woman has yet done,” Tim Tippet, a chronicler of the labor movement, wrote.⁴ To her enemies, she was “an anarchist,” “a she-devil,” “a stormy petrel of labor,” “grandmother of agitators,” and “the most dangerous woman in America.” To one admiring observer she was “a dynamic, go-to-hell type with a bagful of tricks and a vocabulary that caused many a mule skinner to hang his head in shame”⁵

Delighting in her “hell-cat” image, Mother Jones lived up to her name. Once introduced by a professor as “a great humanitarian,” she quickly corrected him. “Git it right,” she interrupted. “I’m not a humanitarian. I’m a hell-raiser.” But to the working classes, she

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² Born Cork, Ireland, 1830; died Silver Spring, Maryland, 1930. Her career as a labor organizer began with the Knights of Labor in the 1870s. Her organizing activities with UMWA and as an independent “walking delegate” continued until the 1920s when she was in her nineties. She is primarily identified with striking miners of Colorado and West Virginia, although she worked with mill, railroad, and streetcar workers or wherever there was “a good fight against wrong.” *The Autobiography of Mother Jones*, edited by Mary Field Patton and with a foreword by Clarence Darrow, was recently reissued, with an introduction and bibliography by Fred Thompson (Chicago, 1972). A recent biography is *Mother Jones, the Miner’s Angel: A Portrait* by Dale Fetherling (Carbondale, Illinois, 1974). See also *The Dictionary of American Biography* and the *Encyclopedia of Social Science*.

³ Foreword, *Jones, Autobiography*, xxi.

⁴ *New York Times*, 23 April 1972, p. 1, reports that pop posters in Appalachia feature not Dennis Hopper or Che Guevara, but Mother Jones. “Now her words and images are being used to help a new generation of Appalachians struggle toward a common movement or experience.” Two publications which reflect this new interest are: *Thoughts of Mother Jones Compiled from Her Writings and Her Speeches*, ed. by Leo Salsoul (West Virginia, 1970) and *Mother Jones in Appalachia* by Keith Dix (Detroit: Radical Education Project) a reprint of an article which originally appeared in *People’s Appalachia*, June-July, 1970.

⁵ *Encyclopedia of Social Science*, Vol. 8, 415.

⁶ Burton R. Bonnett, *Out of the Depths* (Denver, 1942), 32.

was the revered "Mother" who had adopted the workers as her "children" when her own family had been lost in an epidemic. Her place of residence was "wherever there is a good fight against wrong," an expression of her philosophy of life as well as her Manichean penchant for black-or-white absolutes. Her motto: "Pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living."

Mistress of Epithet

Contemporaries of Mother Jones refer to her "salty language" (she herself termed it "classic" or "classic French") and her easy use of "Hell . . . with no more effort than she said 'ethyer' or 'nyther.'"⁷ She once told Frank Walsh, the Chairman of the House of Representatives' Commission on Industrial Relations, "When I get worked up, I am not a very polite character."⁸ In fact, the most distinguishing feature of the rhetoric of this grandmotherly Victorian woman, who dressed in black silk and white lace, was her use of the derogatory epithet. She could not resist punctuating her remarks with epithets and epigrams even in the presence of Presidents. Theodore Roosevelt, the only President who refused to see her, did not escape. She often spoke of "Teddy, the monkey chaser," suggesting a President more interested in African *safaris* than the needs of American workers. Thus, by the standards of the times, she earned her own epithet: "the profane Joan of Arc."

Mother Jones' gift for memorable epithets originated in her rather simplistic view of the world, shaped by her long experience as a labor organizer. Her world was made up of two kinds of people: "poor working people who love truth" and those whom she labeled "enemies of my class." Most of her epithets were impersonal and could be applied indiscriminately to the "money powers" and their hired officials who interfered with "her boys." She often spoke of "Rockefeller's gang of thieves," "high class burglars [capitalists]," "pirates," "plutocrats," "Judas Iscariots," "vulchers [vultures]," "Steel Kings," "two-by-four lawyers," "sanctified cannibals," "sewer rats," and assorted "dogs"—"company lap dogs," "Little poodle dogs,"

⁷ Her answer to Chairman Frank P. Walsh, Commission on Industrial Relations, when he asked, "What do you think?" U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Rules, *Hearings on Industrial Disputes in Colorado and Michigan*, 63rd Congress, 1st session, 1912, 13614.

⁸ *New York Times*, December 1, 1930, 23.

⁹ U. S. House of Representatives Hearings, 19025.

"dogs of war," "bloodhounds," and "curs." Wives of the "money powers" were called self-indulgent "parasites"—"a group of damn cats." She was less caustic toward "poor little sheriffs," "little peg-leg squires," "Sunday-school fellows," and "lickspittles." Inspired by her stylistic genius, her enemies replied in kind.

Her Agitative Strategies

Mother Jones' hell-raising strategies had two aims: to bolster the spirits and goals of the working classes and to expose their exploitation by management. In its tribute to Mother Jones upon her death at age one hundred, the *New York Times* concluded, "Hers were the methods of a pioneer."⁹ Exploiting settings and circumstances, she needed no handbook for revolution; she devised her strategies intuitively and on the spot. She shocked the senses and aroused the emotions. One of her most frightening expressions was "I think I will arrange a little publicity." Admiring newspapermen usually were happy to oblige.

The rhetorical vehicles of Mother Jones generally fall into four categories: "Pageants of poverty," public encounters with management and law officials; public speeches, and writings, including letters to friends and associates in the labor movement, letters from jail, and late in her long life, a dramatic autobiography. Although her activities have been the subject of several historical studies, the nature and effect of her agitative and rhetorical strategies have not been considered.¹⁰ This topic will be the focus of this discussion.

Perhaps Mother Jones is best remembered for what the *New York Times* called "her special faculty . . . the arrangement of what might be called pageants of poverty, processions of the ill-used."¹¹ Her most famous was the twenty-two day "March of the Mill Children" in which she led mill-mangled children on a 125 mile march to Oyster Bay, the summer home of President Theodore Roosevelt, to publicize the immorality of child labor.¹² During her speeches at stops along the way, she would hold up a sickly or mangled child, and

⁹ *New York Times*, December 1, 1930, 23.

¹⁰ See "Crusade for Child Laborers: 'Mother Jones' and the March of the Mill Children," *Pennsylvania History*, 38 (July 1971), 283-296, by C. K. McFarland and "Mother Jones in the Fairmount Field, 1902," *Journal of American History*, September 1970, 286-297, by Edward Steel.

¹¹ *New York Times*, December 1, 1930, 23.

¹² 300 men, women and children left Kensington, Pennsylvania, July 7, 1903, according to Feathering's account. By July 29, the party had dwindled to six, including three children. They were turned away by guards. *Feathering*, 48-57.

she once arranged the children in an empty circus wagon to show their bondage, demonstrating her resourcefulness. Some of her pageants included a dishpan brigade, mop-and-broom brigades, the singing-mothers-wailing-babies jail disruption tactic, and her own numerous marches at the head of striking miners. Each pageant invited confrontations, jailings, and publicity.

Mother Jones relished her public role as tormentor of the oppressor class. Each occasion gave her an opportunity to exercise her gift for invective and to demonstrate her sharp wit. Much of her later fame rests on her fearless verbal exchanges in these encounters, which she enjoyed recalling. Of course, in her version, Mother Jones was always heroine of the day; her oppressors, outwitted and left speechless, could only jail her. Aside from the "money powers," she regarded many who opposed her as wayward children, especially the "boys of the militia" whom she considered as members of the working classes; she often gave them apples and shared her food with them. Their officers she regarded in another light. "Don't come back," a stern Captain warned her as he put her aboard a train for Denver. "If I don't feel like it, I won't," said Mother Jones.¹³

Her quick wit and resourcefulness were as evident in her public speeches as in her public encounters. Throughout her long career, she spoke before many audiences: coal miners on strike, labor leaders at miner's conventions, suffragists, judges, congressmen, and in private meetings with Presidents and governors. By necessity, she had learned to speak extemporaneously and to use the materials at hand for her invention. While speaking on the steps of the Capitol in West Virginia, her eye fell on the inscription in the steps: "Mountaineers are always free." Mother Jones declared: "Now, I want to state right here to this audience that we are going to make that good or we will tear up that inscription."¹⁴

Her long experience and deeply held convictions made a script unnecessary. A *New York Times* reporter described her speaking before 500 suffragists in 1914: "Mother Jones spoke an hour and a half, and then read a few facts . . . 'There's going to be no speaking,' said Miss Leckie, who introduced her, 'and only one talk by the biggest woman in the world!' . . . Mother Jones started in, beginning with Rome, so it was not surprising that it took her nearly two hours

¹³ U. S. House of Representatives Hearings, 10633.

¹⁴ U. S. House of Representatives Hearings, 10629.

to tell the women all about it."¹⁵ One suffragist questioned whether women could ensure free speech in the streets, as Mother Jones advocated, without the vote. Demonstrating her ability to compose a witty, memorable epigram on the spot, even at age eighty-four, Mother Jones answered "cheerfully": "I have no vote . . . and I've raised hell all over this country."¹⁶

The wit of Mother Jones took a different turn when she spoke to the "uncomfortable" as opposed to the "comfortable" suffragists. Speaking to striking coal miners caught in a life-or-death situation, her analogies and epigrams took on an elevated seriousness. An example of her eloquence in a trying situation was a speech she gave at a convention of quarreling miners of the northern and southern coal fields of Colorado. In her autobiography she relates the speech: "'Brothers,' I said, 'you English speaking miners of the northern fields promised your southern brothers, seventy per cent of whom do not speak English, that you would support them to the end. Now you are asked to betray them, to make a separate settlement . . . You are all miners, fighting a common cause, a common master. The iron heel feels the same to all flesh. Hunger and suffering and the cause of your children bind more closely than a common tongue . . .'"¹⁷

But it took the "damnable, infamous" conditions of the Paint Creek District coal fields of West Virginia in 1912 to arouse Mother Jones to the total indignation she needed to reach her peak as an orator in her fifty years as a labor organizer.¹⁸ Mine operators' use of armed guards to deny miners freedom of speech and assembly along public roads and places, the twenty-five murders of guards and citizens, and assaults on women brought Mother Jones hurrying to "medieval West Virginia." On the Charleston levee, she addressed the miners in a speech that "veered close to violence," a charge she usually denied.¹⁹ One eyewitness described Mother Jones and her audience: "She might have been any coal miner's wife ablaze with

¹⁵ *New York Times*, 23 May 1914, 3.

¹⁷ *Jones, Autobiography*, 99.

¹⁸ *Fetterling* makes this assessment, 91.

¹⁹ Despite the violence associated with striking miners, Mother Jones was a firm believer in law and order. Commissioner Harris Weinstock of the House of Representatives' Commission on Industrial Relations once questioned her closely on two conflicting statements, one she had just made to him favoring law and order and a second, allegedly made from the steps of the statehouse in Charleston, West Virginia, wherein she said: "We will protect ourselves and buy every gun in Charleston." Mother Jones did not deny the first statement but felt justified in seeking to protect striking miners from hostile guards. See *House of Representatives Hearings*, 10643. *The New York Times*, December 1, 1898, 27) wrote of her: "If she fought violence with violence in days that now seem so static and cruel, it was not from any belief in it."

righteous fury when her brood was in danger. Her voice shrilled as she shook her fist at the coal operators, the mine guards, the union officials She prayed and cursed and pleaded, raising her clenched and trembling hands, asking heaven to bear witness. She wore long, very full skirts and a black shawl and her tiny bonnet bobbed up and down as she harangued the crowd. The miners love it and laughed, cheered, hooted, and even cried as she spoke to them."²⁰

Two weeks later, on August 15, 1912, Mother Jones and three to four hundred miners assembled at the Courthouse steps in Charleston to present Governor William E. Glasscock with a demand calling for an end to guard rule.²¹ Surrounded by banners which read "Nero fiddled while Rome burned. That is what the governor of West Virginia is doing" and "No Russia for us. To hell with the guard system," Mother Jones delivered what was to become her most famous speech.²² In this "resolute and imaginative speech"²³ lasting one-and-one-half hours, she poured the full power of her tiny frame and eighty-three years into an attack on the tyranny of the ruling class. That day would mark history with "an uprising of the oppressed against the master class,"²⁴ she promised. "Mother" and "her boys" were in full agreement; she was interrupted at least fifty-seven times by applause, laughter, and shouts of "yes, Mother."

Caught up in the excitement of the crowd, Mother Jones led her listeners through a wide range of topics and emotions. She drew laughter with her imitation of the mine owners' wives talking to their dogs: "I love you, dea-h." The audience quieted down when she opined that the origin of the labor movement was "a command from God Almighty." Once, she abruptly stopped and peered into the crowd: "Say, are you an operator, with that cigar in your grub?" She quoted Kipling, but was not sure if he were a colonel or general in the British Army. She spoke of her long experience in the labor movement. "I am not speaking haphazard," she said. "I have the

²⁰ This account was given by Ralph Chaplin, I.W.W. leader and Socialist editor, who was on the same program that day with Mother Jones, Fetherling, 87.

²¹ The next year Mother Jones estimated her audience to be "about 5000 people." See U. S. House of Representatives Hearings, 10629.

²² Perhaps because it is the most readily available speech with its full text printed at the end of *Some Hearings*, see U. S. Senate Sub-Committee on Education and Labor, *Hearings on Conditions in the Four Coal Districts, West Virginia*, 63rd Congress, 1st session, 1913, 2203-2275. *Illustrations* cited in U. S. Senate Hearings.

²³ Fetherling, 91.

²⁴ Although the speeches in her later years were filled with Socialist jargon, Mother Jones was "attached to Socialism, the I.W.O. (which she helped found) and Bolshevism," according to her obituary in the *New York Times* (December 1, 1930, 21). Her biographer, Lew Fetherling, notes that she was a socialist, but not a Socialist. "She was an individual before an individualism." Fetherling, 77.

goods." Essentially, her message was one of hope for the coming industrial revolution which she believed the Star of Bethlehem foretold. The emotional climax of her speech came when she predicted: "I see that hour. I see the star breaking your chains; your chains will be broken, men. You will have to suffer more and more, but it won't be long. There is an awakening among all the nations of the earth." She closed by taking up a collection for beer.

The United Mine Workers of America Journal once praised her eloquence. "She can carry a crowd irresistibly to her own conclusions," the editor asserted; "She can rouse an audience to a frenzy of enthusiasm. . . ."²⁵ Age did not diminish her appeal. Governor Glasscock, described as "a frail, former schoolteacher and lawyer,"²⁶ did little to meet the miners' demands; within two weeks he had called in 1,200 militiamen. The following spring Mother Jones spent eighty-five days in a military prison for her continuous agitation in West Virginia.

Letters from Jail

The correspondence of Mother Jones reveals her style, for she wrote as she talked. In a series of letters typewritten when she was nearly ninety, she told Ryan Walker,²⁷ the Socialist cartoonist, of "old warriors" and "faithful loyal workers" who had been replaced by "the element that is in and around Kansas City . . . who don't amount to a row of pins" and of various "vulchers," "sentimentalists," and "Perretical educators" [sic]. Rival labor organizers were as likely to be the subject of her wrath as were the capitalists. Her letters from jail were especially intense. In 1913, imprisoned and under solitary confinement in West Virginia, she expressed her pent-up emotions in messages smuggled to the outside world by the friendly soldier guarding her. She openly expressed her contempt for her jailors with her usual epithets, reserving a few for "the dear well-fed socialists" who seemed unaffected by the suffering of "us poor devils." With her fighting spirit roused, she closes this letter with her usual defiance: "The pirates can't shut me up even if I am in jail watched by the bloodhounds."²⁸

²⁵ April 28, 1911.

²⁶ *Excerpting*, 92.

²⁷ Walker Manuscripts, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. Two are dated December 12, 1918, and September 21, 1920, another dated only "Sept."

²⁸ Walker Manuscripts, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. Dated April 27, 1913, from "Proc. W. Va. Military Board."

Sometimes Mother Jones expressed herself in loftier language and caused a public sensation. In a telegram to Senator John N. Kern, who was conducting an inquiry into labor problems, an impassioned Mother Jones wrote: "From out of the military prison walls of Pratt, West Virginia, where I have walked over my eighty-fourth milestone in history, I send you the groans and tears and heartaches of men, women and children as I have heard them in this state. From out of these prison walls, I plead with you for the honor of this nation, to push that investigation, and the children yet unborn will rise and call you blessed."²⁹ Reportedly, the friend-soldier read the message and declared: "It's fine stuff, Mother." Others thought so, too. Mother Jones was happy to report that "the Senators in Washington told me that in fifty years nothing had ever struck the Senate like that telegram."³⁰

An open letter smuggled from "the Colorado Military Bastile" in Walsenburg caused a public outcry and a flood of letters to Washington in 1914. "Let the nation know," she pleaded, "and especially let my friend General Francisco Villa know that the United States of America . . . is now holding 'Mother' Jones incommunicado in an underground cell surrounded with sewer rats, tin horn soldiers and other vermin."³¹ She was released after twenty-six days' imprisonment.

Autobiography

Mother Jones was ninety-five years old and near the end of her long life when her Autobiography appeared in 1925. Although her dates are generally considered to be unreliable, she vividly recalls her past struggles and her hopes for the future of the working classes. Much of the information about her life she had given before in Congressional testimony. But her story as she tells it reveals her style as well as her struggles. She wrote and spoke with the eloquence of the unlettered (although she was better educated than she claimed, having read many classical authors). Her sentimentality and glorification of the working classes provided emotional appeal. Her motherly qualities contributed greatly to her effectiveness, for her "boys" responded to her motherliness, as did her foes. She often called for an end to hostilities because "I don't want to hear your mothers crying." By appealing the filial pieties, she shamed men into good-

²⁹ May 18, 1913, Jones, *Autobiography*, 163.

³⁰ *U. S. House of Representatives Hearings*, 19632.

³¹ *National Labor Relations*, May 1914.

ness. Her biographer observes that miners' families were often matriarchies. "Miners," he said, "whether they admitted it or not, were used to being told what to do by their mothers and their wives."³²

Although displaying tenderness toward her "boys" and their families, Mother Jones was essentially made of steel. Recalling her defiance of a Colorado governor who had ordered her deported, she warned West Virginia Governor Glasscock against a similar move. "It won't do to tamper with women of the right metal," she declared. "A man is a fool, if he is a governor, to tell a woman not to do a thing."³³ Her heroic feats of courage and endurance, even into her seventies and eighties, became legend. Her all-night marches at the head of striking miners; her seizure and deportation in the middle of the night by law enforcement officials; her long incarcerations in a cellar and as the solitary inmate in a military prison; her presence at numerous scenes of violence and bloodshed where she often took command, once placing her hand over a cannon, alternately outwitting the enemy and tearing up her voluminous petticoats for bandages—such displays of complete fearlessness made her the heroine in reminiscences and ballads. One who had seen her in action described her succinctly: "She wasn't afraid of the devil."³⁴ Mother Jones herself once confirmed this hyperbole. "I never get nervous when I face bayonets . . ." she declared; "it does not make any difference to me when I die, if I am dying for a good cause."³⁵ In the face of this total personal disregard, law enforcement officials, mine operators, and "scabs" faltered before Mother Jones, for as Thoreau remarked on the ineffectual enemies of John Brown, they "lacked a cause."

Conclusion

Mother Jones never doubted her role as rebel leader of the poor and fighter for freedom, a legacy from her Irish ancestors. "This nation was founded on agitators," she said repeatedly. On any question of freedom, Mother Jones knew she stood on sacred ground when she matched the Bill of Rights against a local ordinance. "Do you have a permit to speak on the streets?" a judge once asked. "Yes, I have." "Who issued it to you?" the judge demanded. She answered:

³² *Exhausting*, 166.

³³ *Proceedings of Meeting Held at Front Steps of Capital in Charleston on August 25, 1862*, U. S. Senate Hearings, 2209.

³⁴ In his introduction to the autobiography, Fred Thompson cites Archie Green in *Labor History* (Winter 1966) who quotes this recollection of John Farrance, author of one version of the following "The Death of Mother Jones," 67.

³⁵ U. S. House of Representatives Hearings, 10621.

"Patrick Henry; Thomas Jefferson; John Adams." Sacred historical documents were her "higher laws."

Her aid of bustling authority was contagious. When Mother Jones, dressed in old-fashioned, aristocratic silk dresses like the ones she once made for Chicago's wealthy ladies, tied on her bonnet and set off marching, she soon had her own army behind her. "God, it's the old mother and her army" became a popular cry. Her biographer wrote: "Mother Jones was . . . a folk heroine whose inspiration reached down to those people who were unimportant in name or wealth but all important in numbers."³⁶ She symbolized the hopes and dreams of thousands of faceless, isolated, inarticulate workers who spent their waking hours toiling in dreary factories and underground mines. She spoke the words that they could not say to others or even to themselves, and they venerated her almost to sainthood. In turn, she had complete faith in the workers and the labor movement. "The future," she prophesied, "is in labor's strong, rough hands."³⁷